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Scotland Emergent

Alan Riach

Where did Scottish literature come from? In the first of a series of four articles, Alan Riach considers the foundational works of Scottish literature, before “Scottish Literature” or Scotland itself even existed.

PART ONE: The antidote to violence: from early times to Columba

Literature comes from stories and songs. In Scotland, as anywhere, it emerges from a number of languages and cultural identities that rise into close relation with each other over centuries. In my essay on Gavin Douglas (“Passion and ordered energy”, *The National*, May 5, 2017), I wrote this: “All the languages of Scotland live relative to each other. Some need more support than others. But none is singularly adequate to the experience of Scotland. Scottish literature itself is a testament to this sense of need. We need all the words we are given, all the words we can use, to express the world we find ourselves in. Above all other arts, literature is what helps us to do this.”

This is an intrinsic defence against linguistic imperialism and racism of any kind. Of course there are racists and thugs in Scotland, just as there are in England, or in any population anywhere. But here’s the antidote. And if you go right back to the origins, right back to where Scotland itself begins to emerge, it’s a mix of different languages that we find – or rather, not a “mix” but a diversity, a range of separate but overlapping languages and idioms, tongues and forms of speech. The speech doesn’t come down to us. Recordings are so recently invented. Yet who’s to say that some practices of voice don’t come down the line in our voices today? Some forms of speech may be created by the physical properties of our bodies, our throats and mouths and vocal chords, and these are created partly by our parents, as they were by their forebears. So maybe our forms of speech do come from the distant past, and should be valued accordingly. If we look at the written sources, though, we might be on surer ground. So how can we describe Scotland’s literature in this emergent era?

Scotland and Scottish literature come from a part of the world inhabited thousands of years ago by a number of different peoples with different languages and ways of life, long before Christianity and our current way of giving dates to time began. Let’s start by sketching a few of these languages and peoples that have been important influences on many writers who come later.

The earliest stories and songs we might consider in a constellation that shines into the beginning of an identifiable tradition of Scottish literature are Celtic. They predate Christianity. They were the legacy of people who lived before, during and after the introduction of writing itself, heroes and lovers like the warrior Cuchulain, who learned the arts of combat on Skye, the lovers Deirdre and Naoise, or Finn MacCoul, and his son the poet Ossian. Though they are usually associated with Ireland, Scotland is also their place. Mythical they may be, but there are shared Celtic identities in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. Perhaps “Deirdre’s Lament” or “Deirdre’s Farewell to Alba”, one of the loveliest of all songs, demonstrates this in itself. After nine happy years in Scotland with her lover Naoise, in and around Glen Etive, Deirdre prepares to leave Scotland for her native Ireland and the culmination of her tragic tale. Her leavetaking is simply a list of the names of all the rivers and valleys and mountains she knows she will never see again: immediately evocative, lasting images. The poem comes at the very beginning of the anthology *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation* (2004), I co-edited with Douglas Gifford and a version for voice and clarsach is recorded on the *Scotland’s Music* CD-set, (LINN CKD 008). This song emerges from the Gaelic tradition, and we’ll come back to this later.

The earliest languages we know of are Pictish, Gaelic, Norse, Old Welsh (Cymric), Old English (Anglian) and Latin. These are all parts of the cultural diversity we begin with.

Nothing that we might call literature comes down to us in Pictish but there are a handful of names that suggest a verbal context of syllabic subtlety. The names are caught in “The Picts”, a poem by Edwin Morgan, from his sequence *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984). It begins:

Names as from outer space, names without roots

Bes, son of Nanammovvezz; Bliesblituth

that wild buffoon throned in an oaken booth;

wary Edarnon; brilliant Usconbuts;

Canutulachama, who read the stars.

Where their fame flashed from, went to, is unknown...

And there is the Ogam alphabet, in which letters are grouped phonetically, with five groups of five letters each taking their names from trees (as Gaelic still does). As John Purser writes in his book, *Scotland's Music* (1992; revised edition 2007), "The arrangement of Ogam letters suggests their sound value was crucial." So the essential connection in literature between music and vision is significant here. Ogam was used as the basis for drawings and designs by the artist J.D. Fergusson (1874-1961) to accompany the first editions of Hugh MacDiarmid's long poem *In Memoriam James Joyce: from a Vision of World Language* (1955). In this poem, the varieties of languages throughout the world are celebrated, not as heralding a globalised uniformity or simplified communication but rather as the basis for a global human culture of difference, distinction and the sympathetic understanding of subtle relationships between people of all nations.

The text of the earliest Scottish poem we know of, *The Gododdin*, is written in Old Welsh or Cymric. It has been dated to anywhere between the 6th and 11th centuries, and survives in a manuscript from the 13th century. *The Gododdin* is attributed to Aneirin, a court poet at Din Eidyn, the settlement that was to become Edinburgh. It assumes a knowledge of the story behind its words, of how the ruler of the Gododdin (the Lothians) brought together a company of 300 warriors to Din Eidyn / Edinburgh. They spent a year preparing for battle by feasting and drinking, then rode south and engaged in a massive fight against the southron forces at Catterick in Yorkshire where all but a handful of them were killed. The 83 fragments in the A-text scatter abstractions and concrete images together. This is my own version of the first one:

Think of the courage of these young men, eager to get into battle –

The thick hair waves of the manes of the stallions riding –

The young men gripping their horses' bellies with strong legs, riding –

Each with a light shield strapped over the rump of his horse –

Swordblades shine blue. Their clothes have gold fringes –

I praise them: Too young to be married, but old enough to fight and be killed –

On a field all sodden and puddled with blood, they were eaten by crows –

Before they could bury him, Owen was lying there covered in ravens –

Who can say where in the field was old Mark's only son hacked down?

In 563 AD Columba sailed from Ireland to Iona, establishing a Christian community. He was not the first to try this. Before Columba, Nynia, or Ninian, had begun his missionary work at Whithorn, in Galloway, in the south-west of Scotland. But arguably, there seems to have been a different ethos at work. Nynia seems to have been devout to the centrality of the church in Rome. Columba, no less devout, seems to have been dedicated to the idea of locality: it would appear that for Columba, missionary worth could only be proved by dedication to the people you lived among, rather than by reporting to an imperial authority. Celtic Christianity seems to be related to Syrian and Egyptian Christianity, with an emphasis on monasteries and hermits in areas remote from centres of power. To scholarship, the life of Columba (520-597) is documented to a certain extent, but its meaning is tantalising, suggestive, and invites literary interpretation and speculation. In various popular versions of Columba's story, there is a convincing humility about the realisation of these missionary ideals, because the faith they invoke arises from human conflict, violence, remorse, penitence and a dedication to trying to make better the lives of others.

The folklorist F. Marian MacNeill (1885-1973), in her book *Iona: A History of the Island* (1920), tells the story that in Ireland where he was born and grew up, Columba was caught copying a Bible. He wanted more copies of the book to be available more widely, to spread the word. But the owner demanded the copy and the chief in charge decreed: "To every cow belongs her calf, and to every book its copy!" In other words, he should keep the Bibles together in one place, and thus be able to secure all the authority to himself. Columba was angered by this. It was a judgement against Columba, personally, but it was also a decree that prevented people from finding out more for themselves. Columba appealed to his friends – powerful men – and this coincided with growing conflicts on a political front. When Columba made his appeal it triggered a terrible battle in which many people were killed.

Remorseful, he decided to leave Ireland and devote himself to missionary work. His name – Columcille in Ireland – means "The Dove of the Church" and his example of peaceful living is potent partly because it possesses this history of moving away from violence,

towards penitence and peace. Scholarship since MacNeill has speculated on this story, and MacNeill herself admitted: “This narrative is not reliable.” In their scholarly introduction to *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (1995), Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Markus describe it as something “about which we would like to know much more”. They leave the question unanswered but allow for speculation and wonder.

It is possible that Columba himself was the author of the “Altus Prosator” – a magnificent song in praise of “The Maker on High” – but he may also have been involved in the compositions of the Columban plainchants collected on the CD *Scottish Medieval Plainchants: Columba, Most Holy of Saints* (CD GAU 129) performed by Capella Nova under Alan Tavener. A sample from this plainchant tradition, “O Columba”, is also available on the *Scotland’s Music* double CD-set.

Columba, his church and the productions of Iona – including the Book of Kells (c.800s), that beautifully illuminated manuscript work now to be seen at Trinity College in Dublin – have sometimes been described as purely Irish. But Columba had to leave Ireland and be out of sight of it in order to begin his work, so once again we have to reclaim him as a figure who brings Ireland and Scotland together.

When he reached Iona, you would like to think that it was as it often is there: bright turquoise seas under cerulean skies and high white clouds, a walkable island of pink rocks and emerald grass seen in a light so intense against a horizon so broad, that the wealth of detail in wave and cloud and terrain conveys a precision of focus and a brightness of colour that helps you to see things more clearly than anywhere else in the world. These qualities can be seen in the paintings of Iona by F.C.B. Cadell (1883-1937) and Samuel Peploe (1871-1935), and before them, the coming of Columba to Scotland was a key subject for William McTaggart (1835-1910). The artists knew very well the significance of their subject in Scottish history, cultural identity and mythic authority, and the Book of Kells is equally secure in that arc of Scotland’s artistic production.

Adomnan (c. 624-704), abbot of Iona (679-704), was the author of the *Life of Columba*, probably written around 697-700, a hundred years after Columba’s death. This book differs from many other lives of saints because it’s full of good stories and glimpses of stories that aren’t fully fleshed-out. Of course, there is no psychologising, but the characters are strong. It is not mere hagiography. One story has Columba traveling to the north of Scotland and meeting people on the shores of Loch Ness who are being terrorized by a

monster from the deeps. Columba banishes it to the depths of the Loch. One report has it that he could speak quietly to a small group of friends but when required his voice could rise like a lion's and address a vast assembled crowd in full volume and utter clarity. Another story tells of him as an old man, knowing his death is near, and welcoming the tender acknowledgement of his old white horse, who walks over and gently lays its long head on Columba's shoulder on the day of his death.

Time and again, the story of Columba suggests a foundational myth: that of a kinship, a common quality of life, something that connects us all, across distances and differences, of language, territory, cultural forms. We'll be coming back to this idea next week.